

## **Contesting the Legitimacy of Negative Online Customer Engagement**

Social media is a complex, interactive and co-creative environment where marketers seek to promote brand values. The construct of online consumer engagement (OCE) has emerged as a key metric of social media marketing outcomes. Research has focused on positive OCE resulting and there is limited insight into the critical drivers of negative OCE. This paper draws on both Practice Theory and Institutional Theory to identify a range of customer and organisational interaction practices during episodes of negative OCE within the customer services Facebook pages of retail banks. Results show misalignment in accounts of practices with customer narratives drawing upon moral legitimisation strategies, external bank narratives drawing on regulatory and cognitive legitimacy whilst internal organisational narratives mobilise pragmatic legitimacy. The empirical work uses Institutional theory to posit that OCE may be targeted at a broader network of actors than has been previously conceptualised.

**Keywords:** Social media; Engagement; Legitimacy; Practice theory; Financial services

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## **1. Introduction**

Social media is a complex, interactive and co-creative marketing environment (MSI-Marketing Science Institute 2014). Brands use social media for a variety of purposes including advertising, information sharing, relationship development, product development and market research. Online consumer engagement (OCE) is a key metric of social media marketing outcomes (Mollen & Wilson, 2010, Cvijikj & Michahelles 2013). OCE comprises “specific interactive experiences between consumers and the brand, and/or other members of the [online] community.” (Brodie et al 2013:107). Understanding OCE is highlighted as a business priority (eConsultancy 2017).

The relatively recent conceptualisation of OCE means that it is an emergent and malleable online practice (Erikson 2010; Gummerus et al 2012). Emergent practices are unclear and lack clear boundaries (Bjorkeng et al 2009). Establishing the legitimacy of OCE practice is important. An emergent practice becomes legitimate when it is connected to wider social and normative structures that are “brought into and become formative” of best practice (Phillips & Plesner 2013:8). In this paper we draw on Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell 1983) and Practice Theory (Schatzki 2003) to examine how emergent OCE practices are either accepted as legitimate or contested as illegitimate.

Typically, research identifies OCE as a positive behaviour and links it to beneficial brand outcomes (Kang et al 2014). However, such approaches overlook negative OCE behaviour of counter-arguing and resisting brand actions (Van Doorn et al 2010). Extant negative OCE research is exploratory (Hollebeek & Chen 2014) or providing findings that conflict with theorised effects, such as linking negative engagement to positive brand outcomes (Berger et al 2010; Liu 2006). It is important to study negative OCE since it is public, persistent

and expressed within an online channel where customers place more trust than broadcast communications and thus has considerable impact (Ward & Ostrom 2006). In this paper we focus upon customers practices of negative OCE and social media managers' responses.

The contribution of this study to consumer research is threefold. First, we focus upon negative OCE; knowledge of negative OCE remains tenuous and there is limited insight into its operation (Hollebeek et al 2016). Second, we answer calls for research to recognise the nuanced nature of OCE and to examine the practices of managing or influencing OCE (Kunz & Jahn 2012; Brodie et al 2013). Finally, we provide a foundation for ongoing study of the OCE phenomenon through integrating Practice Theory and Institutional Theory.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

The use of the term “engagement” dates from 2005 (Brodie et al 2013). OCE is considered an antecedent to the development of a mutually beneficial relationship between consumer and organisation (Smith et al 2015). To promote engagement brands can establish a social media presence through the creation of a Fan Page within a social media platform i.e. YouTube, Twitter or Facebook (Kang et al 2014). Fan Pages offer a place for customers to meet other customers and also to interact with the brand (De Valck 2009). However, survey evidence shows that only 11% of social media messages get a direct response from businesses and that customer expectations of a 30 minutes time lapse before responses are unmet indicating that routinized best practice is not established (Sproutsocial 2016). This is a concern since social media are high in transparency and accountability (Ward and Ostrom 2006) and very poor social media encounters can result in a substantial loss of brand equity (Fournier and Avery 2011).

Academic research has maintained a sustained focus on developing the OCE construct. In a systematic literature review, Ul Islam and Rahman (2016) highlight several research gaps: (1) most studies have emphasised positive OCE and thus negative OCE has remained

unexplored; (2) there has been no study that examines employee-customer engagement interactions; (3) there is a trend towards quantitative methods (4) current research has focussed upon only a limited set of service contexts. In this paper we gather qualitative evidence of negative OCE interactions between the brand and the consumer on Facebook within a retail banking context, which is an ongoing service that involves sustained interaction (Ennew and Waite 2007). Our research focus on “what is being done” using Practice Theory (Schatzki 2003, Nicolini 2012).

Practice Theory is an appropriate theoretical foundation for this study since scholars differentiate OCE from similar psychological relational terms by defining the concept “with reference to the specific types and/or patterns of focal engagement activities” or practices (Brodie et al 2011: 257). A practice is a linked and implicit way of understanding, saying and doing something (Schau et al 2009) and are an important way of making sense and ordering complexity (Garfinkel 1967). A successful practice creates shared understanding and commonly recognised pattern that denotes legitimacy (Schatzki 2001).

Established, embedded and organized practice provide practitioners and observers with information on “how they were doing, what they were doing and... when they were doing it wrong” (Bjorkeng et al 2009: 147). In contrast, novel emergent practices lack “shared understanding, shared habits or skills” and are a “site of contestation” (Bjorkeng et al 2009: 147, Hobart 2010:61). Within the marketing discipline, previous research has focused on embedded marketing practice (Hackley 1999, Hackley 2002) and there fewer studies that map the emerging participatory practices taking place between brands and consumers in digital spaces (Schau et al 2009, Per Skalen et al 2015). In this study we examine the emergent and contested practices used by organisations and customers to influence and manage negative OCE.

Practices are established through “a series of collaborative and competitive strategies that require negotiation and persuasion” (Gherardi 2012:11). We draw on Institutional Theory as a broader framework to understand how “the coordinated efforts of individual actors .. build upon these social structures” to legitimise their actions (Humphreys 2010: 491). Institutions comprise enduring regulation, moral imperatives and cultural signifiers (Scott 1995). Individuals, and organisations “elaborate, manipulate and use” institutions as (1) organising principles, (2) as a vocabulary of motive and (3) as a sense of identity to gain advantage (Thornton & Ocasio 2008: 191). Legitimacy has three dimensions: pragmatic legitimacy (what serves best interests), moral legitimacy (the “right thing to do”) and cognitive legitimacy (linked to embedded established practice) (Suchman 1995). An Institutional Theory perspective argues that legitimacy is conferred through social processes and interactions that draw on macro regulative, moral and cultural institutions (Hybels 1995; Humphreys 2010). Our literature review leads us to frame the following questions: “Which practices do organisations and customers use in negative social media engagement? Is there identification of good and bad OCE practice? Does Institutional Theory provide insight into the legitimacy of emergent OCE practice?”

### **3. Materials and Methods**

To address our research questions we employed an inductive research design and collected qualitative textual and individual interview data. Qualitative data collection is appropriate when studying practices as it is “better able to answer questions as to the “how” of a process, its temporality and the meaning attributed to it” (Gherardi 2012: 5). Combining interview and textual data generates information from two perspectives (the online customer and the organisation) (Cresswell 2013) and is an established social media research design (Olkkonen et al. 2000; Kunz & Jahn 2012).

### 3.1 Data Collection

A dataset of 800 posts was collected from the Facebook pages of eight banks over 52 days. Facebook was chosen as the most commonly used channel by customers and brands (Statistica 2014). Data collection ceased when 50 posts were gathered. Messages were tracked until there were no further comments from the bank or other customers. (For overview of dataset see Table 1 in the Appendices). Three individual unstructured interviews were conducted with social media managers (Table 2 in Appendices). Questions related to organisational social media practices with a focus upon actions, meanings and influences associated with negative OCE. Capturing naturalistic discourse and analysing the conflicting knowledge claims ensures the communicative validity of qualitative research (Kvale 1995). All data has been anonymised.

In our analysis we first identified instances of negative OCE and then unpacked the practices observed and linked this to accounts within the interviews to understand the organisational intentions. We used NVIVO to code iteratively, starting with broad codes such as negative/positive engagement, followed by unique codes which were refined and aggregated in broader conceptual categories. In the following section we provide an account of the legitimisation narratives of customers, the banks and then examine contested practices.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Customer Legitimation Narratives

Customers used pragmatic legitimacy to justify their use of the channel through *Channel Justification practice* after the failure of the “usual route”. For example, when Bank S posted to Sarah that they responded to her query through private message, Sarah posted back:

*...the only way to get things done with big companies that ignore you, is to get on Facebook and tell the public what is going on. It's amazing what happens!! Three*

*complaints in a month on [Bank S] web site got me nowhere but one Facebook post got me what I wanted in a space of 2hours (Sarah customer Bank S).*

Moral legitimacy underpinned *Venting practices* which involved expressing negative emotions i.e. “*lost patience*” and denigrating the organisation. For example,

*When you call up [Bank B] to talk to someone, you get knocked from pillar to post to people who can't speak very good English and when you do finally get to speak to someone who can speak English, they couldn't help me. (John, Customer Bank B)*

Finally, moral legitimacy was mobilised in *Attributing practice* which involved attributing negative motivations and attitudes as underpinning the poor customer service that they had experiences i.e. stating that they felt that the bank did not “*give a toss about me as a customer!*” or arguing that “*loyalty is clearly a one way street*” with the bank.

#### *4.2 Organisational Legitimation Narratives*

An emergent bank practice in response to negative OCE was *Triaging practice* which involved moving the negative customer-brand interaction out of the social media community to a one-to-one communication channel, i.e. Facebook private message function, the call centre or a branch visit. A second bank practice was *Boiler-Plating* which involved posting an automated response, which might contain a thank you for the query, an apology and a contact number, as exemplified here:

*Hi there, thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts with us. Please let us know if you have any UK banking queries; we're here to help and offer assistance should you need any. (Bank B)*

Externally directed bank-to-customer Facebook discourse also engaged in *Channel Justifying practice* which attempted to use cognitive legitimacy to position social media as being for “*general queries*”. Typically, macro regulatory institutions were given such as “*security*

*reasons*” to further legitimise these interactions. For example, Bank R argued that due to legal constraints they could give “*general advice*” only and “*wouldn't be able to discuss anything confidential*”. These arguments were presented in all eight banks Facebook pages we analysed.

When discussing the internal reasoning that underpinned external practice, social media managers utilised institutional mechanisms of regulation and pragmatism to frame Triaging as good practice. The quote below highlights that this practice is good as (1) it is a response to external regulation (2) connects with established customer service protocols and (3) satisfies a desire to control social media.

*You have to worry about compliance, about regulations, about behaviours.....For customer service there are a whole set of established KPIs. We also have a duty in financial services to document complaints so you have to say that our complaints process is sound and is speedy and efficient, so we need to see that in place (Bank H)*

However, there was also evidence that pragmatic legitimacy is an important determinant of emergent activity with a desire to translate “old” established processes to the new media as a route to (re)-gaining control.

*[We] have excellent customer service on the phone...So we have piggybacked a little bit on them and have also felt a lot more comfortable to be in social media through them.... Yes we've actually got a very nice on-boarding chart which shows that if you get any kind of tweet which is related to a risk or a complaint ..here is the agreed internal interactions to resolve something” (Bank H)*

*They wouldn't expect any comments but if somebody came in and commented they would go 'Shit, what do we do now?!' But now we've got a structure ...and we've got a process (Bank SL)*

#### 4.3 Contestation



The bank narratives drew on pragmatic legitimacy, to delegitimize negative customer engagement. One bank respondent noted, if unchecked negativity would “*overpower the messages that we’re trying to get out there.*” (Bank R). Another respondent noted:

*Because if somebody comes on and says ‘you’re a bunch of robbing bastards’ then what can you do...you’re not getting this conversational stuff! (Bank SL).*

For organisations, de-legitimising negative OCE was business imperative due to reassert control and counter the persistency of the message as “*No one’s going to delete them. They’re not going anywhere*” (Bank H). In addition, bank narratives delegitimized customer practices as being morally illegitimate i.e. the wrong thing to do and running counter to an emerging cultural norm saying that customers were “*just copying everyone else*” with an additional perception that they thought that “*people [other customers] are getting fed up with it*” (Bank H).

In contrast, customer narratives delegitimized bank practices of *Triaging* and *Boiler-Plating* and in response continued *Attribution* and *Venting Practices*. Regulatory and security reasons were disputed as really being pragmatically motivated and were “*just words to avoid reprisals, damage control so to speak* (Bank S customer) and “*This is not a security issue; it’s a general fault in your system*” (Bank H Students customer). *Boiler-plating* responses resulted in sarcasm and staff were accused of “*hiding*”.

*Funny how they always reply with just a phone number or website for help, yeah that really helps doesn’t it. (Bank H customer).*

*Why is it [that] all Bank N staff hide behind ... [their] initials and refuse to give ... [their] names when asked on this site” (Bank N customer).*

Customers contended that *Triaging Practice* was counter to the channel “cultural norm” of being a more direct form of communication and “*not another link to a complaints procedure*” (Bank N customer). This theme was found elsewhere in customer discourse, for example “*unless you can provide actual contact and account discussions this is really a pointless page.*” (Bank L customer).

## **5 Discussion and Conclusion**

In this paper we provide a qualitative account of negative OCE in the context of financial services consumption in order to increase understanding of the efforts that individual actors are using to legitimise emergent practices. Specifically we examine employee-customer interactions on brand pages and also the internal discourse within organisations regarding OCE. We find evidence the customer narratives draw upon moral legitimisation strategies, for example citing a “double deviation” in service failure to justify their approach to the organisation via social media and also to give them licence to vent negative emotions (Bitner *et al* 1990). Our work is consistent with website practices of injustice framing and identity framing as identified by Ward & Ostrom (2006) and provides evidence that this behaviour extends to brand-controlled social media channels.

Bank narratives show that organisations are seeking to develop distinct sets of competencies in order to access the reported benefits social media marketing for businesses. Indeed, Shankar *et al* (2002) highlight that the emergence of multiple touchpoints can result in a desire for consistency or commonality in the management of online and offline environments. Our work shows how organisations use existing customer service practices to establish recognised categories and competency frameworks and we show that organisational need for consistency that has resulted in a standardised “blueprinting” approach. However, the use of the cognitive institutional mechanisms conflicts with moral institutional mechanisms employed by customers creating a misalignment. In this respect our work connects with the study by Per

Skalen et al (2015) that examined how within a brand community brand practices can become aligned or mis-aligned. Our study provides evidence of how actors perceive and articulate misalignment.

Our work identifies that the organisational response of social media triage, whilst being viewed as procedurally legitimate by banks, is rejected by customers as not legitimate and bank claims of having to adhere to compliance regulation and security constraints are contested. The internal organisational discourse, which legitimises emergent social media practice, is misaligned with what customers perceive as the channel's moral and cognitive legitimacy i.e. it is the wrong thing to do and it is not how things are done. Our findings show how organisations and customers are strategically drawing on institutional orders to gain advantage through emergent practice and “establish legitimacy discursively in order to authenticate their roles” in social media (Leppanen et al 2015: 2).

Finally we show how Institutional Theory, as a macro lens, helps to identify that negative OCE is “targeted to a much broader network of actors including other current and potential customers, suppliers, the general public, regulators and firm employees” (Van Doorn et al (2010:254). We show how considering both the external and internal legitimacy of OCE practice is important. External legitimacy is granted by external stakeholders, in this case customers, who accept and validate that an organisation performs competently (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002, Greenwood & Suddaby 2006). Internal legitimacy is granted by members of the organisation who embrace or reject new or established practices (Kostova & Roth 2002; Drori and Honig 2013). By showing how negative OCE practices are accepted within a brand fanpage and by contextualising these practices within internal organisational narratives we highlight the importance of considering both perspectives. To conclude, our work provides a foundation upon which to advance further knowledge of the process of legitimisation of

emergent practice such as OCE within social media and shows how Institutional Theory and Practice theory can be combined.

## Appendices

**Table 1: Overview of Dataset**

	No. of posts
1. Queries that were already raised at traditional channels	108
2. Asking a direct question	87
3. Negative feedback on the bank / banking industry	49
4. Providing positive customer feedback	49
5. Threatening the bank to close their account	32
6. Posts with a potential for engagement	27
7. Complaining about not being able to contact the bank	17
8. Posts with no meaning	13
9. Complaining about interest rates, service fees & charges	12
10. Commenting on banking products, product features	13
11. Requesting a direct contact from their bank	8
12. Commenting on banking policies	9
13. Threatening the bank to contact financial ombudsman	4
14. Job application related posts	3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>431</b>

Note: Since some posts included multiple queries, the total number exceeds 400.

**Table 2: Individual Interview participants**

Label	Company Size	Position of Respondent
Bank H	270,000 employees Revenue £47 Billion	Digital Customer Engagement Manager
Bank R	92,000 employees Revenue £13 Billion	Content and Social Media Manager
Bank SL	6,500 employees Revenue £9 million	Social Media Manager

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